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C O N F I D E N T I A L SECTION 01 OF 02 ABUJA 001068

SIPDIS

RIYADH FOR RUSS HANKS

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SUBJECT: NIGERIA,S OBASANJO IN TROUBLE IN THE NORTH

REF: ABUJA 829

Classified by Ambassador Howard F. Jeter. Reason: 1.5(b)

11. (U) Summary: President Olusegun Obasanjo's probable re-election bid faces deep opposition in the North, but he seems to have a strategy for recovery. Nigeria's leader benefits from a lack of credible opponents and the apparent readiness of some Northern elites to join his government, if the enticement is right. All the same, growing numbers of Northerners are praying for new blood. A recent pronouncement by Sokoto Governor Bafarawa highlighted northern unhappiness. End summary.

12. (SBU) During a recent trip to Kano and Kaduna, DCM spoke with 15 northern political and business figures, only one of whom holds a remunerative position in the GON. Just one (not the one receiving GON money) felt President Obasanjo's popularity had grown during the preceding six months. The other 14 saw varying degrees of decline.

13. (C) Recurring themes in the conversations included interlocutors' strongly-expressed hopes that the U.S. would "do something" to convince Obasanjo that he was on the wrong path and to discourage him from seeking a second term. Fear of violence associated with campaigning was pervasive. More general concerns about insecurity were also often expressed. (One businessman commented that the area where he resides had experienced four armed robberies in 11 years, three of them in the past two years.) GON failure to address corruption effectively was also a key theme. VP Atiku Abubakar's reported interest in Kobo Air came up several times; Kobo once again won the largest share of the Hajj airlift contract and once again stranded some pilgrims in Saudi Arabia for nearly a month after Eid el-Adha.

14. (C) Those who had never liked Obasanjo unsurprisingly were the most critical. The Obasanjo Administration's lack of support for agriculture was a particular sore point in this agriculture-dependent part of the country. However, even Obasanjo's supporters were showing doubts. Dr. Liman Ciroma, a highly influential northern elder, said he found himself increasingly isolated when expressing the view that the North should accept another four years with Obasanjo at the helm. Indeed, the bill of particulars against the Head of State was powerful, Ciroma conceded, particularly when measured against the hopes and aspirations of Northerners.

15. (C) Ciroma is holding his fire in public, while erstwhile Obasanjo supporter Sokoto Governor Attahiru Bafarawa delivered a blistering indictment of the Obasanjo Administration on the closing day of a seminar on peace and harmony in the North. Ambassador heard from the Chairman of the Northern Governors' Conference that Bafarawa's speech was formulated at a Conference meeting and had the endorsement of all Northern Governors. Held in Kaduna March 27-28, under the auspices of the Arewa Consultative Forum (ACF), the seminar brought together many of the best-known Northern elites. Bafarawa blasted Obasanjo and the GON for alleged anti-Northern biases and failure to deliver on even his most basic campaign promises. In an effort to blunt the expected attack and to cast doubt on ACF's claim to speak for the entire North (not just Hausas, Fulanis and assimilated ethnic groups), Obasanjo loyalists arranged for pro-OO political figures from the Middle Belt to announce their support for the President almost simultaneously. Few of these individuals pack much political punch, and press play has focused on interpreting and dissecting Bafarawa's attack to the near exclusion of reporting the Middle Belters' encomiums.

16. (C) Ciroma said he and some other northern leaders were now actively searching for alternatives to Obasanjo. One option under consideration was former Head of State Yakubu

Gowon; another was former Commonwealth Secretary-General Emeka Anyaoku. Ciroma admitted that Gowon was past his prime and that his accomplishments as Head of State were less than stellar. However, he would likely bring most of the Middle Belt along, as well as a measure of stability. Anyaoku would rally Igbo votes while being acceptable to most Northerners, Ciroma thought. In our view, neither Gowon nor Anyaoku would inspire many voters; it would take tremendous resources to make them viable alternatives to current contenders.

17. (C) While Ciroma and many others look to tried and true political players, younger Northerners (and some of their elders) grow restless and seek generational change. They dislike the choices they see before them now: Obasanjo, Babangida or Atiku. Few have any name to offer; most say they are praying for divine intervention and express hope that the USG will "do something" to convince Obasanjo to "adopt the Mandela option."

18. (C) Though some believe Obasanjo ultimately will not run, all indications today point to him seeking a second term. The parade of sycophants calling on him to stay thickens daily, a sure sign of his own current thinking. Moreover, some around him (notably Works and Housing Minister Anenih) are recruiting for the Cabinet, not just for the final year of this term, but for the next as well. According to one young Northerner, Anenih's plan is to bring a few old Northern warhorses, such as Lawal Kaita and Umaru Shinkafi, out of the stables for the run-up to the 2003 elections in the belief that their presence will foil efforts to bring forth a unified Northern challenge. Additional credence is given to this story by recent generally positive comments on GON performance and Obasanjo from Kaita ("Tell") and Shinkafi ("Trust"). After the election, Obasanjo would replace the old warhorses with younger steeds, Anenih is said to be telling potential younger steeds (in order to keep them from bucking this strategy). Meanwhile, Obasanjo himself reportedly told media on April 1 that he was beginning a 14-day fast, in order to obtain proper guidance from God and the Nigerian people. At the fast's end, he would announce his intentions for 2003. Thirteen days and counting.

Jeter